

March 14, 2021 by Steve Brandon



The Accusation of Stephen

Acts 6:8-15

1. Ministry (verse 8)
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Throughout the history of the church, there have been plenty of Christian martyrs, those who have given their lives for the Jesus. One such man is Polycarp. (69-156 A. D.)

He was a disciple of the apostle John, the same John who wrote several books of the Bible. As a result, he was well respected in the Christian community. He was a leader in the church in Smyrna, to which Jesus said in Revelation 2:10, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." Indeed, this is what Polycarp was. He was faithful unto death.

He was 86 years old when the police came to his door to arrest him. They were armed with their usual weapons of clubs and spears and knives. But Polycarp was armed with prayer. He knew that they were coming. He could have escaped. But, at 86 years old, he said, "God's will be done."

When the police knocked at the door, Polycarp came to the door, welcomed the police in, and called for food and drink to be given them. He asked them if he could pray for an hour before going away with them. They agreed, being satisfied with the arrangement of food for a delay in the arrest. So, Polycarp stood and prayed. He was so full of grace that he prayed for two hours. Those who had come to arrest him regretted coming to such a godly and venerable an old man.

But when he finished praying, he was brought into the city, into the arena where he would face his death. Standing before the crowds in the area, the Proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. On hearing that he was, he tried to persuade him to apostatize, saying, 'Have respect for your old age, swear by the fortune of Caesar. Repent, and say, "Down with the Atheists!"' In those days, the Christians were known as the Atheists, as they rejected the Roman gods. Polycarp looked grimly at the wicked heathen multitude in the stadium, and gesturing towards them, he said, "Down with the Atheists!"

Polycarp's defiant display displeased the Proconsul, who said, "Swear and reproach Christ, and I will set you free." Polycarp replied with those famous words, "Eighty and six years have I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?"

The proconsul continued, "I have wild animals here. I will throw you to them if you do not repent." "Call them," Polycarp replied. "It is unthinkable for me to repent from what is good to turn to what is evil. I will be glad though to be changed from evil to righteousness."

Another threat ensued, "If you despise the animals, I will have you burned." Polycarp replied again, "You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and is then extinguished, but you know nothing of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. Why are you waiting? Bring on whatever you want."

So, they prepared a bundle of sticks into a pile, prepared to burn Polycarp alive. Polycarp took off his outer clothes and stood on the pile of sticks. Some soldiers came to nail him to the stake so that he would not move while being burned. But Polycarp said, "Leave me as I am, for he that gives me strength to endure the fire, will enable me not to struggle, without the help of your nails."

So they simply bound him with his hands behind him like a distinguished ram chosen from a great flock for sacrifice. Ready to be an acceptable burnt-offering to God, he looked up to heaven, and said, ...

"O Lord God Almighty, the Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, by whom we have received the knowledge of you, the God of angels, powers and every creature, and of all the righteous who live before you, I give you thanks that you count me worthy to be numbered among your martyrs, sharing the cup of Christ and the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and body, through the immortality of the Holy Spirit. May I be received this day as an acceptable sacrifice, as you, the true God, have predestined, revealed to me, and now fulfilled. I praise you for all these things, I bless you and glorify you, along with the everlasting Jesus Christ, your beloved Son. To you, with him, through the Holy Ghost, be glory both now and forever. Amen."

Then the fire was lit, and the flame blazed furiously. Yet, Polycarp was not consumed. The flames went around him. Those who saw him said that he did not look like burnt flesh, but golden brown like bread that is baked. Eventually, when the proconsul saw that his body could not be consumed by the fire, he commanded an executioner to pierce him with a dagger. And Polycarp received the crown of life.^[1]

Polycarp is simply one of many Christians who have been martyred for their faith. This morning, we have the privilege of hearing the story of the first Christian martyr. His name is Stephen. His story is told in Acts 6 and 7. We are introduced to Stephen in the middle of chapter 6. We see him being accused of blasphemy. We see his defense in his sermon as recorded in Acts 7, which, by the way, is the longest recorded sermon in the book of Acts. This is followed by his martyr's death.

Stephen is initially mentioned in Acts 6:5, as one of the seven men chosen to serve tables, freeing up the apostles for the work that God has called them to do. We know a little bit about him, that he was "of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:3). This morning, we will find out a bit more about him, as we look at those who accused him of his crime worthy of death. Next week, we will look at the sermon that he preached (in chapter 7). My message this morning is entitled, "The Accusation of Stephen." Let's read our text:

Acts 6:8-15

And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

I have six words to use as we work through our text. The first word is ...

1. Ministry (verse 8)

Verse 8 describes the ministry of Stephen. Not only was he one of the men chosen to oversee the serving of tables to the widows, but he also had quite a ministry as well. Verse 8 says that "Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people." This is a summary statement of Stephen's gifting and his ministry.

First of all, we see his gifting described as being as "full of grace and power." Add this to the qualities of verse 3, that Stephen was "full of the Spirit and of wisdom," and you see that Stephen was quite a man. He was "full of the Spirit." That is, the Holy Spirit was in him and guiding him in all his ways. He possessed great wisdom, the ability to discern a situation and act accordingly.

He was full of grace, that is, kindness and mercy and charm and tact. Stephen had great power. In this context, it wasn't political power, nor was it power to exert his way over the way of others. It was the power to do "wonders and signs" (as mentioned in verse 8).

It's difficult to know exactly what these "wonders" and "signs" were. But we have a clue back in chapter 5. We read, "Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles" (Acts 5:12). This verse is almost exactly what we read in verse 8 of our text. And in chapter 5, we see this working itself out in healing others. Look at chapter 5, verses 15 and 16, "so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed." We can only assume that this is what Stephen was doing with his power. He was healing people. He was casting out demons. Everyone who came to him was being cured of their illnesses!

That's the ministry of Stephen. He was full of kindness and mercy. He was healing all who were coming to him! Yet, all was not received so well. In verse 9, we see some people coming to challenge Stephen in his teaching. I'm calling this, ...

2. Dispute (verses 9-10)

That's what was taking place. People were rising up to dispute what Stephen was saying.

Acts 6:9

Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.

That's quite an entourage lined up against Stephen. You have some people from the synagogue of the Freedmen, and from four other locations: from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia. Regarding this synagogue, this is the only time in the Bible that the "synagogue of the Freedmen" is mentioned. This probably refers to a group of descendants of Jewish prisoners of war, who were taken captive, by the Romans in 63 B. C. They were forced to be slaves. When they were released, they took the name, "Freed-men." The prisoners were eventually released and formed a colony along the Tiber River in Rome. Then, they were expelled from Rome and, presumably found refuge in Jerusalem, where they built a synagogue and worshiped the Lord together.^[2]

They came against Stephen and disputed what he was saying. They came along with others from various locations across the known world. I'm sure that Stephen felt ganged up on, as it was many against one. But it didn't matter. According to verse 10, Stephen held his ground.

Acts 6:10

But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

In other words, Stephen was winning the argument! Whatever was being said, Stephen had an answer. His challengers didn't know how to answer back. It's because Stephen was wise. And the truth was on his side. It's easiest to win an argument when the truth is on your side. But further than that, the Holy Spirit was on his side. And it's easiest to win an argument when God is on your side.

Yet, this didn't satisfy those who were arguing with him. When they were losing the debate, they changed tactics. They brought in others, who they instigated to make some preposterous claims. This comes in verse 11, ...

Acts 6:11

Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God."

I'm calling this ...

3. Instigation (verse 11)

Now, we don't know exactly what Stephen was saying. But knowing the character of the man, that he was "of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:3), it's hard to see that Stephen would never, ever, ever speak blasphemous words against Moses or the Lord. These people were brought in to lie and deceive. It's not unlike what happened during the trial of Jesus. Perhaps you remember when the chief priests and scribes were trying to convict him, they couldn't. It wasn't until they brought in a bunch of false witnesses, two of whom came forward and said, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days'" (Matthew 26:61). This was a complete misunderstanding of what Jesus had taught. When Jesus spoke about the destruction and rebuilding of the temple, he was talking about the temple of his body (John 2:21). Yet even this wasn't enough to convict Jesus. It took another direct confrontation about who Jesus claimed to be (Matthew 26:63).

In a similar way here with Stephen, we see these men bringing in others, falsely accusing him of blasphemy. This is what it took to secure a charge against Stephen. It took some men, who came in and were willing to say whatever it took to bring charges against Stephen to destroy him.

Just right here, let's just take stock in what has taken place. Stephen's ministry was about doing good to people. He was healing the sick! He was casting out demons! Rather than accepting his good deeds, they turned against him, because they didn't like his message. So, they disputed with him. They brought in some false witnesses to make their case against him.

What was the case with Stephen will certainly be the case with us as we deal with those who are unsaved around us. We can be the kindest, most gentle people on the planet. We can be the most faithful of friends. We can be an example of love and virtue. We can be incredible supporters of those in need. We can give of our time and resources to help those young women who experience an unwanted pregnancy. We can care for those children whose family has fallen apart through foster care. We can support housing and feeding those who have destroyed their lives due to drugs and alcohol. And when it comes to the gospel, the world will hate us. The world will hate our message.

They hated the message that Jesus brought. They hated Stephen's message that he brought. What makes us think that we are any different? If we have the same gospel, we very well may be treated in the same way, regardless of the exemplary character of our lives or our display of Christian commitment. Apart from the grace of God in the times in which we live, we too will face the scourge of our society.

Now, it may come in different forms in our day than in their day. But we aren't ever going to persuade people to believe the gospel apart from the grace of God. If Stephen, a man full of wisdom and of the Holy Spirit, a man full of grace and power, who was doing great wonders and signs among the people (verse 8). If Stephen couldn't persuade his listeners to believe in the gospel, what makes us think that we can? It's only the Spirit of God that will ever persuade people to believe the gospel. And Stephen helps us to see that.

When Paul described the preaching of the gospel to unbelievers, he said this: "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). In other words, the only way that people will understand and embrace the gospel is for God to work in their lives and grant them the spiritual ability to discern the things of God. Stephen is a great example of what natural men will do when they hear the good news. They will hate the gospel and take vengeance out upon the messenger. And this is what they do. In verse 12, we see the ...

4. Arrest (verse 12)

Acts 6:12

And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council,

This is mob violence at its best. You hate someone and want to destroy him. So you stir up the crowds and take justice into your own hands. That's what they did with Jesus. They hated him and wanted to destroy him. So they stirred up a crowd and came by night with clubs and swords to arrest Jesus and bring him to the council. It's no different with Stephen. Mob violence apprehended him and brought him to the council.

This is the same council that dealt with Jesus. This is the same council that dealt with Peter and John (Acts 4) and all of the apostles (Acts 5). And here comes another follower of Jesus, brought in for the religious authorities to deal with. In Acts, we saw Peter and John rebuked. They were told to speak no more in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:18). Later, in chapter 5, all of the apostles were beaten and charged not to speak in the name of Jesus (Acts 5:40). And now, we will see the logical progression. Spoiler alert, Stephen will lose his life for speaking in the name of Jesus. Let's move on to the ...

5. Accusation (verses 13-14)

This is the heart of the text. This helps to set up chapter 7, when Stephen will give his defense.

Acts 6:13-14

and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us."

We see the accusations against Stephen to run along two lines. First of all, there is the line of the temple. Second, there is the line of the law. Do you see it? It's repeated twice. In verse 13 and verse 14, we see the same thing.

In verse 13, these false witnesses say that this man "never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law." The holy place is a reference to the temple, where the priests would offer their sacrifices and where the presence of God dwelt. Apparently, in Stephen's preaching, he spoke much about the temple, being against its primacy in our coming to God. Also, Stephen was speaking against the law. In fact, as the accusation goes, Stephen "never ceases" to speak against the law (verse 13).

We see these two topics brought up again in verse 14, "for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." "This place" is a reference to where the council was convened. The council was there on the temple grounds. Apparently, it was clear from the preaching of Stephen that he was speaking about Jesus destroying the temple.

Stephen was doing nothing more than quoting Jesus. Do you remember the story? Jesus was in the temple area with his disciples during the passion week. As they were leaving, the disciples were marveling at the beautiful buildings on the temple grounds. You had this whole slew of buildings surrounding the most important building, the temple itself. The disciples were pointing out to Jesus how beautiful the buildings were. They were talking about how it "was adorned with nobles and offerings" (Luke 21:5). It's not unlike our reaction might be when driving out of Chicago, seeing the skyline and marveling at the beautiful buildings that adorn the horizon. As the disciples were viewing the buildings, Jesus said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down" (Luke 21:6).

The destruction of the temple is the first thing that the crowds accused Stephen of saying. They said that Stephen said that Jesus was going to destroy the temple. They also said that Stephen said that Jesus "will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." (Acts 6:14). The customs that Moses delivered to them was the law, the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch. Now, these things were true. First of all, less than forty years after Stephen said these things, the Romans came and totally destroyed the temple mount. Jesus said that "there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down" (Luke 21:6).

One of the things that most fascinates me about archeology is the debate that carries on today about the exact location of the temple on the temple mount. Today, if you go to Jerusalem, you will see the temple mount. It's a large platform, some 37 acres of property. That's equivalent to 25 football fields. Right now, there are several Muslim mosque on the grounds. The Jewish temple was there on the temple mount somewhere. But there's a debate in archeology about where, exactly was the temple. There are lots of guesses. [👁️](#) But nobody knows!

Nobody knows because there are no stones left from the temple! If there was even a single stone left, archaeologists would have some idea of the general vicinity. We know that the temple was somewhere on the temple mount, but we don't know where. That's because Jesus said that no stone would be left. Such was the extent of the destruction by the Romans when they destroyed the temple in A. D. 70. Stephen was prophesying of this. It was totally true. It just hadn't happened yet.

Further, Jesus did change the customs of Moses. Because, he fulfilled the law. He was the great sacrifice, to which all sacrifices pointed. With the sacrifices no longer necessary, Jesus abolished the priesthood! Jesus is now our high priest. You can read all about these things in the book of Hebrews! These are all changes in the customs of Moses.

Now, what's difficult about how we understand these accusations is that up to this point, we have no idea what Stephen was actually preaching. Yet, we will find that these two ideas govern the sermon that he preaches in chapter 7. He will talk about the temple. He will talk about the law.

Stephen will talk about the temple to say that God is not bound by this holy place. In fact, the key to understanding Stephen's sermon is to know that God has worked among his people in many places outside of Israel, outside of the holy place. He first called Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia (Acts 7:2). And Abraham never received any inheritance in the promised land. The land was for his offspring after him (Acts 7:5). Even the patriarchs didn't inherit the land, they were exiled to Egypt (Acts 7:14). The best they got was to be buried in the land (Acts 7:15).

Even Moses, the great leader of Israel, was not in the land when God called him. He was in exile in Midian when the Lord appeared to him (Acts 7:29-30). Even when Solomon build the temple, God was not confined to the temple. As Isaiah says, ...

"Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool.
What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord,
Or what is the place of my rest?
Did not my hand make all these things?" (Acts 7:49-50 quoting from Isaiah 66:1-2).

So, the Jews, who were so concerned about the temple as the holy place where God meets us, had missed the fact that God wasn't bound by the temple. Often in the redemption history of Israel, God worked among his people in different places!

Further, the second theme of the Stephen's sermon was about the law. These Jews had prided themselves about the law, but they never kept the law in the first place. They rejected Joseph (Acts 7:9). They rejected Moses (Acts 7:27). They chose to worship idols (Acts 7:41). They rejected the Messiah. Stephen summarized, "Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, who you have now betrayed and murdered" (Acts 7:52).

It is helpful here to point out how different this sermon was than the rest of the sermons in Act. Usually, we see the general pattern of

preachers talking about the life, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Jesus in their messages. We will see this continue (Acts 10, 13). But here, Stephen didn't do this. On the one hand, it's because he was responding to specific accusations. But on the other hand, it demonstrates that New Testament evangelism wasn't a cookie-cutter sort of elevator talk where you learn what to say and say it every time.

My encouragement to you in your evangelism is to have the life, death, burial, resurrection, ascension and exaltation outline in your mind to share with others. However, don't feel bound by it. Like Stephen, simply give testimony to Jesus however you have experienced him in recent day. For instance, this week, I had an opportunity to speak with someone about how we have been caring for some children that are not our own. To help us in motivation, we have been reminded of Matthew 25, where Jesus said, "as you [cared for] one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (Matthew 26:40). I extended this to talk about how believing the gospel brings us to serve in these ways. The guy I spoke with smiled at me, happy that I was living my life as I wanted, because he was living his life as he wanted. Our conversation quickly diverted a different direction.

Finally, we see ...

6. Radiance (verse 15)

Before I read verse 15, I want for you to catch the context. Words were spoken about Stephen, when as yet, he didn't have an opportunity to respond to his accusers. Those in the council railed against him, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law" (verse 13). They were pointing fingers and describing the blasphemy of Stephen (verse 11). Even the high priest had questions about what Stephen was preaching (Acts 7:1).

While these things are happening, we read ...

Acts 6:15

And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Stephen was as wise as a serpent, but as innocent as a dove (Matthew 10:16). So likewise, this is how we ought to be when people come at us and confront us in what we believe. Remember, it's the gentle answer that turns away wrath (Proverbs 15:1). Stephen, even when people were railing against him, he had a smile on his face, patiently waiting for his turn to speak.

In this way, Stephen was a bit like Polycarp. When the policemen came, Polycarp welcomed them and gave them food. These actions by Polycarp were actions of love. The appearance of Stephen's face, likewise, communicated love for those in the council.

So, even as people speak against you, be joyful. Do you remember the joy of the apostles who were beaten for preaching Jesus. After receiving their beating, they went on their way "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name" (Acts 5:41).

Stephen was taking the abuse, knowing that his time would come to give his defense, which we will see next week.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on March 14, 2021 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] I pulled many of my words straight from this website: <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/polycarp/>.

[2] Simon Kistemaker, New Testament Commentary: Acts, p. 228.

[3] <http://www.watchmanbiblestudy.com/BibleStudies/Temple/Locations.html>.